

**PARK, HILL MIGRATION
AND
CHANGES IN HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOOD SYSTEMS
OF
RANA THARUS IN FAR-WESTERN NEPAL**

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DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Lai Ming Lam and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that conservation ideology has led conservation practice over the last quarter of a century, the removal of local residents from protected areas in the name of biological preservation remains the most common strategy in developing countries. Its wide-ranging impacts on displaced societies have rarely been properly addressed, particularly in regard to the establishment of parks. This thesis is based on 15 months fieldwork carried out among a group of displaced park residents known as Rana Tharus in the country of Nepal. They have long lived in Royal Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve in the far-western part of that nation.

This thesis is largely inspired by recent academic advocacy that conservation-induced dislocations on rural communities are having a serious influence on policy implementation. Such advocacy is leading to more effective and pragmatic park policies. West, Igoe and Brockington (2006) point out that park residents are an indispensable part of protected areas and their cultural and economic interactions with parks occur in diverse ways. Without a full understanding of these interrelationships, any kind of forced conservation policies will be doomed to fail and cause severe disturbances to people's lives. Like most protected areas in developing countries, this thesis shows that the unplanned resettlement scheme of Shuklaphanta failed to mitigate the socio-economic losses that Rana Tharus experienced due to their displacement. The ethnographic data notes that when attention is paid solely to the economic losses experienced by Rana Tharus, the social costs such as social exclusion, loss of culture, and psychological depression are rarely addressed in the dislocation program. An inadequate understanding of the links between protected areas and local livelihoods is one of the major causes for the continuation of park-people conflicts including Shuklaphanta.

In this thesis, I demonstrate how the displacement and other social changes have gradually diminished the social and economic livelihoods of the Rana people. I argue that many of these social impacts were unexpected because Rana Tharus actively responded to all these changes by putting new social relations into effect. As a result, significant social transformations have occurred in contemporary Rana Tharu society. The undivided household unit was no longer their first preference when the new economic realities made themselves felt, and gender and patrilineal kin relationships became more tense. The traditional labouring system (*Kamaiya*) that existed between wealthy and poor Rana Tharus declined due to increasing poverty. All these had erased their ability to maintain sustainable livelihoods that they had previously enjoyed. Moreover, substantial loss of landownership had made it impossible for Rana Tharus to share equal social, economic and political status with the new migrants - the twice-born Pahaaris.

These accumulated and unforeseen results of conservation practices can only be well understood if a holistic analytical perspective is adopted. This thesis borrows the concept of sustainable household livelihood system and the social theories of practice, power and agency to explore the dynamic relationships between conservation, local livelihoods and culture. The stories told by the Rana Tharu provide some important lessons. I argue that dislocation programs should be put aside or at least closely reviewed if their hidden social impacts are not well understood or at least lead to some form of compensation. Such action may prevent the further expansion of park-people conflicts which are shown to hinder conservation efforts of Shuklaphanta and local sustainable livelihoods.

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This thesis grew out of the author's own personal interests. Although I am not Nepalese I do love the country of Nepal, especially its natural environment and friendly people. This thesis could not have been written without the continuous assistance of many people in different stages. They are unfortunately far too many to list individually. However, I owe a special thanks to Shiva Adhikari who has been my voluntary research assistant over the last five years and remains my dear friend.

Shiva, you are my irreplaceable companion and without your unconditional help and spiritual support, I feared that this study might never have been completed. Furthermore, many Nepalese people who assisted me had many concerns about going to the western region of the country, which has been described as a major Maoist area of activity. I could never forget your parents' words about my life: 'Shiva, she comes from far to visit our country, you should help her as much as you can.' I remembered during our fieldwork that we faced many problems but we solved them together. My fieldwork consisted of wonderful and risky moments, and the pressure far exceeded that which a junior researcher like me could manage. I recalled on several occasions we were in the midst of a war: we were stuck on a bus for four days because of confrontations between Maoists and the security forces on the highway. We were awoken by bombing at night in the village; your life was seriously threatened by the Maoists and we were interrogated by one of the Maoist leaders. However, your positive attitude towards life inspired me to be brave and to face those challenges. Your words, 'We can do it. We can do our best' gave me the greatest encouragement and assuaged my anxiety. It is really beyond description how you shared my stress. My debt of gratitude to you is deep.

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ideas come alive and enable me to tell a meaningful story. John, thanks for directing my attention to the importance of understanding the adaptable nature of household livelihood. Michael, thanks for your introduction of theory of practice to me. Andrew, thanks for your advice regarding rural livelihood, which fuelled my interest in exploring the influence of contemporary conservation practices on local sustainable livelihoods. These invaluable inputs and suggestions made a large contribution to this thesis. Moreover, I must give my full appreciation to Mr. Phillip Thomas for editing my grammar and expression so that this thesis became more readable.

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For the completion of this thesis I must extend my thanks to my new-born baby, Owen. I remembered that your companionship during the final stage of thesis writing was the greatest encouragement for me. Looking how you grew larger and larger in my stomach, my mind and body were fuelled with much energy. I know that without your emergence I could not have finished the thesis on time.

I am grateful to the following institutions for their generous financial support of this thesis: Ford Foundation, University of Adelaide and the Discipline of Anthropology. I am also very grateful to the local people in Nepal who participated by telling me their stories. Indeed the fieldwork experience changed my way of thinking. I understood that every person can respond to social and environmental changes in certain active ways no matter how socially deprived his or her situation is. More importantly, I hope that the life stories of the Rana Tharus that have been

collected for this thesis will inspire conservation policy planners to search for more effective park management strategies and finally those Park residents' livelihoods can be secured.

This thesis, hopefully, is not an end but a beginning, and will encourage scholars to do more in-depth studies in the near future. Such is my ambition.

NOTE: With the consent of Ranas who agreed to be interviewed, most names shown in this thesis are real except for a few which are pseudonyms, in order to protect their privacy. All the photos included in this thesis were taken by the author.

NOTES ON RANAS, PRONUNCIATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

The name 'Rana' is a confusing word particularly for those readers who have knowledge regarding the history of Nepal. It generally refers to the Rana family who ruled the Kingdom of Nepal from 1846 until 1953. Jang Bahadur was the first ruler of this dynasty. His original family name was Kunwar but he took the title Rana, after an old title denoting military glory used by Rajput princes in northern India. His descendants took this name as their family name. The downfall of this dynasty did not diminish the family's influence. Today, they still control most of the government's administrative positions. However, 'Rana' as it appears in this thesis mainly refers to the indigenous Rana Tharu community unless otherwise stated. This confusion is due to problems of translation. In written English, there is no difference between the Rana rulers and the Rana community but in the Nepalese language (i.e. written Nepali - Devanagari script) and pronunciation, they are different. For distinction purpose, I use the 'Rana family' to refer the rulers. In addition, I chose not to call them Rana Tharus because I found that they strongly resisted being called 'Tharus'. The fact was that they distanced themselves from other Tharu groups through their claim of being Rajput descendants. For a detailed discussion of Rana self-identity see Chapters Six and Nine.

Both the Nepali and Rana language were used in interview situations. Because the Rana language is an unwritten language, I usually translated what was said into the closest Nepali pronunciation. When I transcribed the Nepali words, I consulted R. L. Turner's *Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of Nepali Language* (1997 reprinted version). To make the thesis more readable to non-Nepali specialists, most interview contexts (both Nepali and Rana language in originality) were translated into English.

SPECIAL NOTES

My major fieldwork finished in December 2005. Since then there have been three major developments that may have long-term implications for Ranas' livelihoods. The first one constituted the dramatic political changes leading to the end of the 240-year-long absolute monarchy and Nepal becoming a democratic republic on 28th May 2008. After 10 years of civil war the Nepalese government and the Maoists concluded negotiations successfully on 9th November 2006. On 19th January 2007, the Maoists agreed to disarm (during my latest trip, I was told by locals that there were no more Maoist activities in my study villages). The constituent assembly election was held on 10th April 2008 and the Maoists became the biggest party. In the first assembly meeting, all political parties unanimously agreed to abolish the monarchy and the unpopular King Gyanendra was ousted from the royal palace. However, these changes have not stopped the political turmoil in Nepal and nor ended most people's economic hardships. Recently, the Maoist party warned that it would refuse to join the new government because it held an unfavourable attitude towards the first president, Mr. Ram Baran Yadhav from the Nepali Congress Party. What are the implications of these political developments on Ranas' livelihoods? Only more insightful and longitudinal research work can answer this question.

Recently, I have read an interesting article written by Nepalese scholar Nina Bhatt (2003). He analyses the relationships between the Nepali kings and the park management. There is no doubt that Nepali kings contributed much to Nepal's early conservation efforts. The creation of the first national park - Royal Chitwan National Park - in 1973 by King Mahendra and the establishment of the largest national conservation organisation (King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation) were good examples. However, he also points out that the effectiveness of park management is often linked to different political contexts. The multi-party political system of the 1990s had adverse impacts on conservation efforts because officials worked only for the benefit of their own party or alliance. As a result, officials were not interested in working in remote areas where most Parks are located. Compared to the pre-1990s monarchy the park authority received less attention and resources. Today, the downfall of the Shah Dynasty has

enormous implications for the Nepalese people and the future of their country's park management. There is an urgent need for further research to investigate what these implications are.

The second change was the reinforcement of park management on the south-west side buffer zone villages. The Chief Warden of Shuklaphanta, Tikkram Adhikari, said to me in our interview that a few army camps would be set up very soon in this region in order to stop illegal resource use activities. One of the army camps would be located in the Dhokka Block buffer zone forest area. The implementation of this policy may result in restrictions to forest resources and impact adversely on the local people's livelihoods. This ambitious park management strategy was still in the planning stage when I revisited the field in December 2006, but the Ranas' response to it would be worthy of more follow-up study.

The third change was the rising political unrest in the Tarai region. In an earlier study done by Gaige (1975), he pointed out that conflict and tension had long existed between the plains people and hill people. My discussion in Chapter Six and Chapter Nine has also clearly demonstrated that social, economic and political exclusion was deeply felt by the Ranas and twice-born Pahaaris. As a result, although the ten year-long Maoist insurgency has now been resolved, the Madhesis movement which emerged in mid-January 2007 has rapidly become a major potential risk to peace in the country. Madhesh in Nepali means Tarai and the Madheshi community includes Maithilis, Bhojpuris, Awadhis, Tharus and other smaller tribal groups. In contrast to the three dominant hill castes (Brahmins, Chhetris and Newars) who constituted 36% of total population in Nepal but occupied 89.2% of position in civil service, the Madheshi community accounted for 32% of the population but occupied only 8.4% of positions in the civil service (Karna 2007). They are now asking for the same rights as Pahaaris following a century of neglect. The on-going violent conflicts occurring in the Tarai region not only affect the daily livelihoods of Tarai people, but also shape the development of ethnicity among Tarai communities. Due to the limitations of this thesis additional research work is needed for finding out what the Rana community's future is.

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ACRONYMS

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BZUGC	Buffer Zone User Group Committee
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
KMTNC	King Mahendra Trust Nature Conservation
KTWR	Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve
PAs	Protected Areas
PCP	Participatory Conservation Program
RANA	Rana Tharu
RCNP	Royal Chitwan National Park
RNA	Royal Nepalese Army
RSWR	Royal Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve
VDC	Village Development Committee